English Toolkit: Indicator 1.3.5

Goal 1.0 Reading, Reviewing and Responding to Texts

Expectation 1.3 The student will explain and give evidence to support perceptions about print and non-print works.

Indicator 1.3.5 The student will explain how common and universal experiences serve as the source of literary themes that cross time and cultures.

Assessment Limits:

Identifying the experiences, emotions, issues and ideas in a text or across texts that give rise to universal literary themes Considering the influence, effect, or impact of historical, cultural, or biographical information on a text (will not be dependent on student's prior knowledge)

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Public Release #1 - Selected Response Item - Released in 2005

English Indicator 1.3.5
Handout(s):
- English Resource: Starwalking with Sarah

Which of these statements best expresses a theme of "Starwalking with Sarah"?

A. Learning about nature requires risk.
B. Modern life limits our interaction with nature.
C. Experiencing nature provides personal fulfillment.
D. Scientific knowledge is needed to understand nature.

Public Release #2 - Selected Response Item - Released in 2005

English Indicator 1.3.5
Handout(s):
- English Resource: Mama's Pie

Which of these words is most closely related to a theme of "Mama's Pie"?

A. ambition
B. connection
C. hope
D. peace

Public Release #3 - Selected Response Item - Released in 2005

English Indicator 1.3.5
Handout(s):
- English Resource: In the Country of Grasses

Which of these ideas is most closely related to a theme of "In the Country of Grasses"?

A. anxiety about encountering danger
B. thrill of exploring the natural world
C. enjoyment from making new friends
D. concern about seeing a habitat destroyed

Public Release #4 - Selected Response Item - Released in 2006

English Indicator 1.3.5
Handout(s):
- English Resource: Breakfast

Read "Breakfast," the first chapter from the novel *Jim the Boy*. Then answer the following:

Which word is most closely related to the theme of "Breakfast"?

A. adventure
B. freedom
C. maturity
D. memories

Public Release #5 - Selected Response Item - Released in 2006

English Indicator 1.3.5
Handout(s):
- English Resource: Ghost Crab

Read the essay "Ghost Crab." Then answer the following.

Which of these lines from the essay best expresses a theme of "Ghost Crab"?

A. The shore at night is a different world…
B. The blackness of the night possessed water, air, and beach.
C. It was the darkness of an older world, before Man.
D. The little crab alone with the sea became a symbol that stood for life itself…

Public Release #6 - Selected Response Item - Released in 2007

English Indicator 1.3.5
Handout(s):
- English Resource: Bug, Interrupted

Read the essay "Bug, Interrupted." Then answer the following:

This essay mostly develops a theme of

A. the beauty of night skies
B. the purpose of living things
C. the benefit of outdoor activities
D. the effect of childhood memories

Public Release #7 - Selected Response Item - Released in 2007

English Indicator 1.3.5
Handout(s):
- English Resource: A Sea Worry

Read the essay "A Sea Worry." Then answer the following:

Which of these ideas is most closely related to a theme of the essay?

A. taking risks
B. valuing books
C. seeking approval
D. preserving nature

Handouts

One of the worst mistakes we can make in life is not to be alive enough, aware enough, of the magic in simple things. My daughter, Sarah, now a teenager, reminded me of that lesson a few years ago and I hope I'll never forget.

---

by Steve Pollick

It is a midwinter's Sunday night, sometime after supper, and I find myself walking slowly on a country lane near home, pondering this mighty question:

"Daddy, is there really a sheriff's star?"

The question comes from a soft, eight-year-old voice connected invisibly to a small, bemittened hand that grasps my big, bare hand. I have to listen closely to catch all the words, some of which are directed at boot-tops.

Sarah Katherine is starwalking with her Dad.

Her voice is barely audible over the shuffling and padding of our footsteps in the rural quiet, a chill westerly breeze behind us. "The kids at school all draw their stars like a sheriff's star, and they say there's a real one in the sky," she says.

Now I cannot say for sure that there is no sheriff's star in the sky. An answer to that question is not listed in my Dad's Book of Astronomy for Kids. And I certainly don't know everything, despite what Sarah Katherine may think. But I tell her that I don't think there is such a so-named star.

You have to be prepared for that sort of inquiry when you dare to say, "I'm going for a nightwalk; anyone want to come with me?"

The instant race of light footsteps across the kitchen floor above my head told me that someone was eager to go. Sarah. After a few minutes spent wrestling with her leggings, coat, stocking cap, mittens, and scarf, we set out.

"Daddy, this is funner than sittin' around the house," Sarah says, talking faster than we are walking.

"I hear the wind," she adds quickly. It is moaning softly through the high-voltage lines well overhead. The lines march across the neighbors' farms and tower over the local country lanes on tall, gangly steel skeletons and mighty wooden poles.

We also hear the buzzing of supercharged electricity as it bolts through the power lines. We crane our necks far back to see the crossarms and the insulators—way, way up there, almost to the stars.

"Daddy, are we going as far as Spooky Tree?" Yes, to Spooky Tree and beyond.

Spooky Tree, so named by Sarah, is a gnarly old black walnut. It is the sole survivor of its kind along this otherwise barren stretch of farm lane. Its twisted, weather-beaten limbs stand out starkly in the night light. I've told Halloween stories around its trunk.

It is a perfect night, the starry pinpoint sparkles of diamonds dotting a velvet sky. The air is cold— crisply, not uncomfortably, so. Sarah is well bundled. Her rubber bootheels drag on the macadam of the lane—clop, clop, clop.

Two small mittens surround my cold hand. "I'll keep your hands warm, Daddy."

Presently I begin a primer lesson on celestial navigation. I point out the Big Dipper.

"See?" I say, dropping to one knee and using my favorite walking stick, a wrinkly old piece of tree root from Pennsylvania, as a pointer. "Those stars there. It's like a big pot with a long crooked handle. See how they go?" More pointing and gesturing. Our eyes by now are well attuned to the starlit dark.

"And those two stars at the front edge of the pot," I say, "they point right up at the North Star—right there! That's North. And the North Star is the last star in the handle of the Little Dipper. It's like a small pot. See how it pours into the big pot?"

"Uh-huh, Daddy. I see it." We walk on.

"Can we keep walking longer, Daddy?"

"Daddy, I like to make things out of the stars by connecting them." So have adults, I tell her.

We see Orion, the Hunter, right overhead in the southern sky. Orion's great Belt is easy to pick out, as is the tip of his sword and his hunting bow. Below and left is Sirius, the Dog Star. Sirius is Orion's dog.

"Like Blondie is our dog, Daddy?" Yes, sort of.

We see the Seven Sisters, the Pleiades, and I talk about the lost sister in the myth. Sarah doesn't understand myths, but she feels bad for the lost "girl."

We head for the bridge over Muskellunge Creek by Longanbach Farm. We call it the "crick," not "creek."

The creekwater twinkles in the waxing, three-quarter moon and chuckles as it pours over the rocks. Its animation is inspirational: "Moonsparkles on the water, Daddy. See them?"

We check the water on both sides of the bridge. A mild spell has thawed the water and the creek flows in good health.

Presently, a light haze drifts in under the moon, forming a big ring in the moonlight.

I point out Jupiter and Mars, and how they follow about the same path as the sun across the sky. The two planets are both inside the ring around the moon. I tell how the ring means wet weather is coming. My prediction is accepted as if gospel. Weather forecasters should have it so good.

We retrace our way back toward home, but Sarah, vowing she's not cold, asks to continue. "Just a little more, Daddy."

We head down toward "our bridge," which crosses the Muskellunge. The haze has slipped away on the wind and the moonlight again is sharply bright. Our shadows, cast down from bridge to water, stand out starkly. We see more moonsparkles.

As we turn for home, I see—make that feel—a shadow cross our path. I look up and back quickly.

"Sarah, look!" I whisper hoarsely. She turns and sees the dark form of a great bird gliding silently down the creekbottom, guided as precisely along the meanders of the creek as if it were on rails.

It is a great horned owl, a flying tiger, out on a night hunt.

I tell Sarah how the big owl has specially designed feathers, which allow it to glide in perfect silence and catch stuff, like mice, to eat. My pupil drinks it in, her mitten tightening its grip.

The talk winds down. There is much for each of us to absorb. I find myself thinking of other starwalks, especially one when I took Sarah's older brothers, Andy and Aaron, out another winter night years ago.

[37]Aaron must have been about three then. He was too small to negotiate the deep-plowed furrows on the Dickman Farm, so I ended up carrying him on my shoulders. This was a cross-country starwalk to a special place, another "spooky tree"—a big old cottonwood, another lone sentinel of the farmland.

I especially remember telling the boys to keep the flashlight turned off, to let them learn how well their eyes can see at night if given the chance. I remember, too, taking them right up to the old tree, letting them finger the rough bark and search and probe its texture with their fingers.

The next spring, a man with a bulldozer pushed the old tree to the ground. Then he cut it up and burned it to ashes, its history gone up in so much smoke. I hope that tree will live in the boys' memories as it has in mine.

My reverie is broken with Blondie's barking. Her incredible dog ears have caught the clopping of our feet on the road, and she lets Sarah and me know she's unhappy that she wasn't asked along.

Too soon, our walk is over. But I'll come to find out later that a starfire was lit this night in a little girl. She talked for days about our starwalk, and now regularly asks to go again.

By chance, after my young starwalker was asleep, I happened on a passage from Antoine de Saint Exupery's classic, *The Little Prince*. For me, it was a wonderful coincidence, a perfect ending to a perfect evening.

"All men have the stars," the passage went, "but they are not the same things for different people. For some, who are travelers, the stars are guides. For others they are no more than little lights in the sky. For others, who are scholars, they are problems... You—you alone—have the stars as no one else has them."

"Starwalking with Sarah" by Steve Pollick, from Starwalking with Sarah & Other Essays, copyright © 1994 by Toledo Blade Co. Used by permission of The Blade.

by Pamela Kennedy

I was nine the summer Mama taught me how to bake a pie. It was an occasion, a rite of passage, a journey back into family history. The lesson was full of truth, pungent as our wild berries, liberally dusted with flour, and punctuated with the wooden rolling pin.

I stood next to the cutting board, my dress covered with a folded dishtowel, cinched around my middle and tied at the back.

"You take this much flour," Mama said, dumping an undisclosed amount in a large bowl, "then you add shortening—about this much." She dropped a glob of the sticky white stuff into the flour. "Now a pinch of salt. Take this pastry cutter and cut through the flour and shortening until it looks like cornmeal. Here now, you do it."

I had no idea what cornmeal looked like, but I kept cutting through the mixture, certain Mama would give me a hint when it got to the right stage. After a bit, the flour and shortening were crumbly and coarse. Mama looked at it, nodded, and announced it was time to add the water.

"You never dump water into pie dough," Mama warned. "You sprinkle it on, a tiny bit at a time. Use your hand like this."

She dipped her fingers into a cup of water and shook the drops over the mixture, tossing it now and then with a fork. When the dough could be pressed together into a crumbly ball, she stopped, took about half of the mixture out of the bowl, and pressed it together into an oval on the floured board.

"Now you roll it out," she said, "but only roll it once. Pie crust is like people—you treat them gently and they turn out tender, but if you keep pushing and pressing them, they'll turn out tough and tasteless every time."

I rolled—center to edge—all around the circle.

"Don't worry if it crumbles around the edges," Mama said, noting my frustration. "That's the best sign of a good batch!" Gently we transferred the flattened dough into the pie plate.

"Now the berries." The tart wild blackberries, frosted with sugar and flour and seeping with purple juice, tumbled into the waiting pie shell. We had picked them the day before, hunting through the burned-off growth in the woods behind the cemetery. I still bore scars from the adventure: hairline scratches laced my hands and purple stains outlined my fingernails. These berries were earned with sweat and blood and would taste all the better for our efforts.

After I rolled the top crust, Mama cut a curved line across its center. "Just like my Mama used to do," she murmured. She crimped the edges with her finger and thumb, deftly creating a scalloped border around the pie. After brushing the top crust with cream, we slipped the pie into the oven, and Mama put on the teakettle—a sign we were to have a talk.

When the china cups were filled and steaming, Mama pulled two chairs up to the table and we sat. For the first time, I sensed that Mama and I were somehow equals and I felt

special, privy to some feminine world I'd never known before. Mama stirred her tea and started to talk, introducing me to her past, the time before she was Mama.

"We were poor kids," she said, "but we never knew it. Daddy and Mama raised ten of us on a small farm where we had a little garden, a pasture, and an orchard, all surrounded by woods. We always had fresh or canned vegetables, milk from a cow, and plenty of eggs, even during the Depression. And Mama always made pies. There were green apple pies and pumpkin pies, even mince meat when one of the neighbors had good luck hunting and got a deer. But the favorite was always wild blackberry pie. We kids called them 'little creepy crawlers' because in the woods behind our house, the vines crept along the forest floor, tangling themselves around stumps and over stones. We'd clamber through the prickly vines, searching for the sweet, dark berries and plopping them into our tin lard buckets. The smell of the berries, warm from the sun, was heavenly; and we ate as many as we saved, staining our fingers and lips with the purple juice.

"My mother baked the pies as soon as we returned with the fruit. She always hummed while she baked, flour dust rising about her like a cloud and settling on her hair and faded cotton dress."

"Is that when you learned how to bake pies, Mama?" I asked, trying to imagine my mother as a young girl, scratched and stained with berry juice and filled with the same insecurities and sense of wonder as I.

"Yes," Mama said, and her lips curved in a smile, soft with remembrance. "I was just about your age, and I remember I had to stand on an apple crate to reach the counter top."

The fragrance of the baking pie wound around us, casting a spell of homey intimacy as we sipped our tea, sharing our heritage until the timer interrupted us with a rude buzz. As we removed the steaming pie from the oven, Mama sighed with satisfaction and said, "There, now that's a job well done." And somehow I know she meant more than just the baking of the pie.

The summer afternoon of my first pie was more than thirty years ago, and yet its memories are as sweet and real as the berries in the bowl before me. I think it's time to call my daughter in from play and show her how to bake a pie. Perhaps we'll sit and share a cup of tea while it bakes, and I will tell her how her great-grandma used to bake a pie.

"Mama's Pie" by Pamela Kennedy, copyright © 1987 by Pamela Kennedy. Reprinted by permission of Pamela Kennedy.

When traveling to new country, it is a gift to have a guide. They know the nuances[1] of the world they live in. Samuel smells rain the night before it falls. I trust his instincts and borrow them until I uncover my own. But there is danger here. One can become lazy in the reliance on a guide. The burden of a newcomer is to pay attention.

The Land Rover slips into the savannah like a bird dog entering a marsh. We are fully present. I watch Samuel's eyes scan the horizon. He points south.

"Zebra," he says. "They are migrating north from Tanzania. Thousands more are on their way."

Hundreds of zebras walk the skyline. They become animated heat waves.

We drive closer. I have never seen such concentrations of animals. At one point I think I hear thunder. It is the hooves of wildebeests. Suddenly, the herd of zebra expands to include impalas, gazelles, and animals I do not recognize.

"Topi," Samuel says.

I flip through my field guide of African mammals and find it. An extraordinary creature, it is the color of mahogany with blue patches on its flanks and ocher[2] legs. I look at the topi again, this time through binoculars. Its black linear face with spiraling horns creates the illusion of a primitive mask. The topi I watch stands motionless on a termite mound. Binoculars down, I look at Samuel. He says the topi resemble hartebeests. A small herd of topi runs in front of the vehicle in a rocking-horse gait[3] and vanishes.

[8]Samuel gives away his knowledge sparingly—in gentle, quiet doses. He is respectful of his teachers and those he is teaching. In this way he is generous. He gives me the pleasure of discovery. Slowly, African riddles unravel themselves like a piece of cut linen.

The sweet hissing of grasses accompanies us as we move ahead. We pass the swishing tails of wildebeests. We are looking for lions.

[10]Anticipation is another gift for travelers in unfamiliar territory. It quickens the spirit. The contemplation of the unseen world; imagination piqued[4] in consideration of animals.

We stop. Samuel points. I see nothing. I look at Samuel for clues. He points again. I still see nothing but tall, tawny grasses around the base of a lone tree. He smiles and says, "Lions."

I look. I look so hard it becomes an embarrassment—and then I see eyes. Lion eyes. Two amber beads with a brown matrix. Circles of contentment until I stand; the lion's eyes change, and I am flushed with fear.

"Quiet," Samuel whispers. "We will watch for a while."

As my eyes become acquainted with lion, I begin to distinguish fur from grass. I realize there are two lions, a male and a female lying together under the stingy shade of a thorn tree. I can hear them breathe. The male is breathing hard and fast, his black mane in rhythm with the breeze. He puts his right paw on the female's shoulder. Ears twitch. We are no more than ten feet away. He yawns. His yellow canines are as long as my index finger. His jowls look like well-worn leather. He stands. The grasses brush his belly. Veins protrude from his leg muscles. This lion is lean and strong. No wonder that in the Masai mind every aspect of a lion is imbued[5] with magic.

[1] nuances: degrees of difference in meaning
[2] ocher: color having shades of yellow, orange, and brown
[3] gait: way of moving by lifting the feet in a different order or rhythm such as a trot, gallop, or run
[4] piqued: excited one's interest or curiosity
[5] imbued: filled; saturated

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Breakfast

by Tony Earley

During the night something like a miracle happened: Jim's age grew an extra digit. He was nine years old when he went to sleep, but ten years old when he woke up. The extra number had weight, like a muscle, and Jim hefted[1] it like a prize. The uncles' ages each contained two numbers, and now Jim's age contained two numbers as well. He smiled and stretched and sniffed the morning. Wood smoke; biscuits baking; the cool, rivery smell of dew. Something not quite daylight looked in his window, and something not quite darkness stared back out. A tired cricket sang itself to sleep. The cricket had worked all night. Jim rose to meet the waiting day.

Jim's mother opened the stove door with a dishrag. Mama was tall and pale and handsome; her neck was long and white. Although she was not yet thirty years old, she wore a long, black skirt that had belonged to her mother. The skirt did not make her seem older, but rather made the people in the room around her feel odd, as if they had wandered into an old photograph, and did not know how to behave. On the days Mama wore her mother's long clothes, Jim didn't let the screen door slam.

“There he is,” Mama said. “The birthday boy.”

Jim's heart rose up briefly, like a scrap of paper on a breath of wind, and then quickly settled back to the ground. His love for his mother was tethered[2] by a sympathy Jim felt knotted in the dark of his stomach. The death of Jim's father had broken something inside her that had not healed. She pulled the heaviness that had once been grief behind her like a plow. The uncles, the women of the church, the people of the town, had long since given up on trying to talk her into leaving the plow where it lay. Instead they grew used to stepping over, or walking inside, the deep furrows she left in her wake. Jim knew only that his mother was sad, and that he figured somehow in her sadness. When she leaned over to kiss him, the lilaced smell of her cheek was as sweet and sad at once as the smell of freshly turned earth in the churchyard.

“Oh Jimmy,” she said. “How in the world did you get to be ten years old?”

“I don't know, Mama,” Jim said, which was the truth. He was as amazed by the fact as she was. He had been alive for ten years; his father, who had also been named Jim Glass, had been dead for ten years and a week. It was a lot to think about before breakfast.

Mama put the biscuits she pulled from the oven into a straw basket. Jim carried the basket into the dining room. The uncles sat around the long table.

“Who's that?” Uncle Coran said.

“I don't know,” said Uncle Al.

“He sure is funny-looking, whoever he is,” said Uncle Zeno.

“Y'all know who I am,“ said Jim.

“Can't say that we do,” said Uncle Coran.

“I'm Jim.”

“Howdy,” said Uncle Al.

“Y'all stop it,” Jim said.

The uncles were tall, skinny men with broad shoulders and big hands. Every morning they ate between them two dozen biscuits and a dozen scrambled eggs and a platter of ham. They washed it all down with a pot of black coffee and tall glasses of fresh milk.

"Those biscuits you got there, Jim?" said Uncle Zeno.

Jim nodded.

"Better sit down, then."

In all things Jim strove to be like the uncles. He ate biscuits and eggs until he thought he was going to be sick. When Uncle Zeno finally said, "You think you got enough to eat, Doc?" Jim dropped his fork as if he had received a pardon.

Uncle Zeno was Jim's oldest uncle. His age was considerable, up in the forties somewhere. Uncle Coran and Uncle Al were twins. Each of them swore that he did not look like the other one, which of course wasn't true. They looked exactly alike, until you knew them, and sometimes even then. Not one of the uncles found it funny that they lived in identical houses.

Uncle Al and Uncle Coran built their houses when they were young men, but, like Uncle Zeno, they never took wives. Most of the rooms in their houses didn't even have furniture; only Uncle Zeno's house had a cookstove.

Jim's mother cooked and cleaned for the uncles. When she said it was too much, the uncles hired a woman to help her. Uncle Coran ran the feed store and cotton gin. Uncle Al managed the farms. Uncle Zeno farmed with Uncle Al and operated the gristmill on Saturday mornings. As the head of the family he kept an eye on everyone else. Occasionally the uncles grew cross with each other, and, for a few days, Uncle Al and Uncle Coran would retire to their houses immediately after supper. There they sat by their own fires, or on their own porches, and kept their own counsel[3] until their anger passed. In general, however, everyone in the family got along well with everyone else; to Jim, the sound of harsh words would always strike his ear as oddly as a hymn played in the wrong key.

Jim patted his stomach. "That ought to hold me till dinner," he said.

"You ate a right smart," Uncle Coran said.

"Well," said Jim, "I am ten years old now."

"My, my," said Uncle Al.

"I've been thinking it's about time for me to go to work with y'all," Jim said.

"Hmm," said Uncle Zeno.

"I thought maybe you could use some help hoeing that corn."

"We can usually put a good hand to work," Uncle Zeno said. "You a good hand?"

"Yes, sir," said Jim.

"You ain't afraid to work?"

"No, sir."

"What do you say, boys?" Uncle Zeno said.

Uncle Al and Uncle Coran looked at each other. Uncle Coran winked.

"He'll do, I guess," said Uncle Al.

"Let's get at it, then," said Uncle Zeno.

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[1] hefted: lifted
[2] tethered: bound
[3] kept their own counsel: stayed by themselves

"Breakfast" from *Jim the Boy* by Tony Earley, copyright © 2000 by Tony Earley. Used by permission of Little, Brown, and Company.

Ghost Crab

by Rachel Carson

The shore at night is a different world, in which the very darkness that hides the distractions of daylight brings into sharper focus the elemental[1] realities. Once, exploring the night beach, I surprised a small ghost crab in the searching beam of my torch. He was lying in a pit he had dug just above the surf, as though watching the sea and waiting. The blackness of the night possessed water, air, and beach. It was the darkness of an older world, before Man. There was no sound but the all-enveloping, primeval[2] sounds of wind blowing over water and sand, and of waves crashing on the beach. There was no other visible life—just one small crab near the sea. I have seen hundreds of ghost crabs in other settings, but suddenly I was filled with the odd sensation that for the first time I knew the creature in its own world—that I understood, as never before, the essence of its being. In that moment time was suspended; the world to which I belonged did not exist and I might have been an onlooker from outer space. The little crab alone with the sea became a symbol that stood for life itself—for the delicate, destructible, yet incredibly vital force that somehow holds its place amid the harsh realities of the inorganic[3] world.

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[1] elemental: essential, basic
[2] primeval: ancient, prehistoric
[3] inorganic: not composed of living matter

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Bug, Interrupted

by Jane Meneely

Who was I setting free that night: myself, my daughter, or just the fireflies?

Summer nights on the Eastern Shore, when the sun finally settles below the lip of the land and a misty haze hangs like netting from the tops of the trees, the magic begins. Slowly at first, like dancers drifting onto a dance floor, fireflies begin to wink through the tall grass that rings our field. When I was a kid, this was the signal for me to race through the dark, flailing an open jam jar at the shimmering creatures. I'd try to scoop them all inside my jar so I could carry the magic with me forever. Then came the abrupt call to bed, and I'd punch holes in the jar lid with an ice pick and set the glassy cage on my night table.

I'd settle into my pillow to watch the firefly shadows on my walls. I thought they must be fairies, ready to transform into their true gauzy, winged selves while I slept. If I could stay awake long enough, I'd be able to get a glimpse of them and make a wish. Of course I would let them go in the morning. But morning would come, and I'd have a jar full of dead bugs on my table—little dried husks. I don't know when it dawned on me that I'd been the instrument of their deaths, but I know at some point I stopped chasing fireflies and just sat on my porch and watched them, feeling vaguely guilty about the countless generations I'd snuffed.

Eventually I grew up and came to have a daughter of my own. She too would watch the flickers fill the evening. On the Shore they swarm through the woods at night, great clouds of flashing beacons moving every which way. When Lindsay was big enough, she toddled after them, cupping her hands to catch them and gazing in wonder at the firefly blinking on her palm. And then came the jam jars, and she too would scoop and swipe in the dark, collecting a treasure-trove of flashing delight.

"I must have caught a hundred of them," she said one night, breathless from careening around in the field. Sweat made its way in muddy streaks down her cheeks. Jagged snags of blood seeped from her bare calves where the blackberry brambles had grabbed her. She waved the jar triumphantly, and indeed she had captured a full horde of fireflies. "I'm going to put it next to my bed tonight," she declared. "It will be my night-light."

We washed off the sweat and prickles and she settled into bed. The jam jar stood straight and tall on the night table, its soft beads of light growing, fading, growing, fading. Faint shadows rose and fell on the wall. "It's like stars breathing," she said.

I looked at my daughter, watched her eyelids droop, saw her fingers relax. And I quietly lifted the jar and walked from the room. I couldn't bear to leave the fireflies to die, trapped in the glass castle. I couldn't bear to let Lindsay wake up and find the gentle creatures dead. So I unscrewed the lid and shook them free in the yard. When she woke the next morning and found the jar empty, Lindsay shrugged. "You let them go, didn't you?" she said blithely.[1] I said, "They would have died if I hadn't."

Sooner or later, she found out the hard way that living things left in jars die. Maybe I should have allowed her that pang of guilt that wafts from a jar of lifeless bugs. But why? Surely life's lessons needn't deliberately come at such expense. And perhaps I, the parent, needed . . . oh, who *knows*? All I really know is that the fireflies appreciated my effort that night. For them, it must have been wonderful to tumble back into the night air, to feel the soft wind again, to light up the dance floor one more time.

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[1] blithely: cheerfully or lightheartedly

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A Sea Worry

by Maxine Hong Kingston

THIS SUMMER MY SON body-surfs. He says it's his "job" and rises each morning at 5:30 to catch the bus to Sandy Beach. I hope that by September he will have had enough of the ocean. Tall waves throw surfers against the shallow bottom. Undertows have snatched them away. Sharks prowl Sandy's. Joseph told me that once he got out of the water because he saw an enormous shark. "Did you tell the lifeguard?" I asked. "No." "Why not?" "I didn't want to spoil the surfing." The ocean pulls at the boys, who turn into surfing addicts. At sunset you can see the surfers waiting for the last golden wave.

"Why do you go surfing so often?" I ask my students.

"It feels so good," they say. "Inside the tube, I can't describe it. There are no words for it."

"You can describe it," I scold, and I am very angry. "Everything can be described. Find the words for it, you lazy boy. Why don't you go home and read?" I am afraid that the boys give themselves up to the ocean's mindlessness.

When the waves are up, surfers all over Hawaii don't do their homework. They cut school. They know how the surf is breaking at any moment because every fifteen minutes the reports come over the radio; in fact, one of my former students is the surf reporter.

Some boys leave for mainland colleges, and write their parents heart-rending letters. They beg to come home for Thanksgiving. "If I can just touch the ocean," they write from Missouri and Kansas, "I'll last for the rest of the semester." Some come home for Christmas and don't go back.

Even when the assignment is about something else, the students write about surfing. They try to describe what it is to be inside the wave as it curls over them. Making a tube or "chamber" or "green room" or "pipeline" or "time warp." They write about the silence, the peace, "no hassles," the feeling of being reborn as they shoot out the end. They've written about the perfect wave. Their writing is full of clichés. "The endless summer," they say. "Unreal."

Surfing is like a religion. Among the martyrs are George Helm, Kimo Mitchell, and Eddie Aikau. Helm and Mitchell were lost at sea riding their surfboards from Kaho'olawe, where they had gone to protest the Navy's bombing of that island. Eddie Aikau was a champion surfer and lifeguard. A storm had capsized the *Hokule'a*, the ship that traced the route that the Polynesian ancestors sailed from Tahiti, and Eddie Aikau had set out on his board to get help.

Since the ocean captivates our son, we decided to go with him to Sandy's.

[10]We got up before dawn, picked up his friend, Marty, and drove out of Honolulu. Almost all the traffic was going in the opposite direction, the freeway coned to make more lanes into the city. We came to a place where raw mountains rose on our left and the sea fell on our right, smashing against the cliffs. The strip of cliff pulverized into sand is Sandy's. "Dangerous Current Exist," said the ungrammatical sign.

Earll and I sat on the shore with our blankets and thermos of coffee. Joseph and Marty put on their fins and stood at the edge of the sea for a moment, touching the water with their fingers and crossing their hearts before going in. There were fifteen boys out there, all about the same age, fourteen to twenty, all with the same kind of lean v-shaped build, most of them with black hair that made their wet heads look like sea lions. It was hard to tell whether our kid was one of those who popped up after a big wave. A few had surfboards, which are against the rules at a body-surfing beach, but the lifeguard wasn't on duty that day.

As they watched for the next wave the boys turned toward the ocean. They gazed slightly upward; I thought of altar boys before a great god. When a good wave arrived, they turned, faced shore, and came shooting in, some taking the wave to the right and some to the left, their bodies fish-like, one arm out in front, the hand and fingers pointed before them, like a swordfish's beak. A few held credit card trays, and some slid in on trays from McDonald's.

"That is no country for middle-aged women," I said. We had on bathing suits underneath our clothes in case we felt moved to participate. There were no older men either.

Even from the shore, we could see inside the tubes. Sometimes, when they came at an angle, we saw into them a long way. When the wave dug into the sand, it formed a brown tube or a golden one. The magic ones, though, were made out of just water, green and turquoise rooms, translucent walls and ceiling. I saw one that was powder-blue, perfect, thin; the sun filled it with sky blue and white light. The best thing, the kids say, is when you are in the middle of the tube, and there is water all around you but you're dry.

The waves came in sets; the boys passed up the smaller ones. Inside a big one, you could see their bodies hanging upright, knees bent, duckfeet fins paddling, bodies dangling there in the wave.

Once in a while, we heard a boy yell, "Aa-whoo!" "Poon tah!" "Aaroo!" And then we noticed how rare a human voice was here; the surfers did not talk, but silently, silently rode the waves.

Since Joseph and Marty were considerate of us, they stopped after two hours, and we took them out for breakfast. We kept asking them how it felt, so they would not lose language.

"Like a stairwell in an apartment building," said Joseph, which I liked immensely. He hasn't been in very many apartment buildings, so had to reach a bit to get the simile. "I saw somebody I knew coming toward me in the tube, and I shouted, 'Jeff. Hey Jeff,' and my voice echoed like a stairwell in an apartment building. Jeff and I came straight at each other—mirror tube."

"Are there ever girls out there?" Earll asked. "There's a few who come out at about eleven," said Marty.

"How old are they?"

"About twenty."

"Why do you cross your heart with water?"

"So the ocean doesn't kill us."

I describe the powder-blue tube I had seen.

"That part of Sandy's is called Chambers," they said.

I am relieved that the surfers keep asking one another for descriptions. I also find some comfort in the stream of commuter traffic, cars filled with men over twenty, passing Sandy Beach on their way to work.

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English Indicator 1.3.5
Answer Key

Public Release Item #1 - Selected Response (SR) - 2005
C. Experiencing nature provides personal fulfillment.

Public Release Item #2 - Selected Response (SR) - 2005
B. connection

Public Release Item #3 - Selected Response (SR) - 2005
B. thrill of exploring the natural world

Public Release Item #4 - Selected Response (SR) - 2006
C. maturity

Public Release Item #5 - Selected Response (SR) - 2006
D. The little crab alone with the sea became a symbol that stood for life itself…

Public Release Item #6 - Selected Response (SR) - 2007
D. the effect of childhood memories

Public Release Item #7 - Selected Response (SR) - 2007
A. taking risks